THE HISTORY OF THE THIRD AVENUE ELEVATED RAILROAD

1875 - 1956

BY LAWRENCE D. ACKMAN

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By 1860 - 1870, New York City was the nation's chief financial center; the panics of 1837, 1857, and 1873 were therefore felt more severely there than in other places.

Nevertheless, elevated lines were built through Manhattan between 1870 and 1880, and these,—with the Brooklyn Bridge—opened in 1883 — and other transportation facilities, gave enormous impetus to the city's growth and prosperity. The Third Avenue Elevated Railway was more responsible for the development of upper Manhattan Island than any other single factor.

Between the years 1860 and 1900, the population of cities in the U.S.A. increased tremendously due to the rapid industrialization and the resultant availability of many jobs in urban areas. In 1900, there were approximately twenty-five million people living in cities as opposed to only five million in 1860. This created a problem because the streets were becoming crowded with all sorts of vehicles. The New York City government had to find a solution which would provide rapid transit for the thousands of workers who rushed to work every morning. The Third Avenue Elevated Railway was to solve that most pressing problem facing the city during these years of accelerated growth.

After the authorization of the construction of the "El" in 1875, designs were submitted. Over forty designs were received. One proposed that a moving platform consisting of an endless belt with seats be mounted over the sidewalks,

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with stations at which passengers could step on and off, but the plan was dismissed as too dangerous. Another inventor suggested that an eight foot pneumatic tube be erected above the street. Passengers, riding in cars seating four, would be blown through the tubes by blasts of air. This plan was abandoned, too, for fear that the blower might fail, trapping travelers in an airless confinement. A subway was considered a laughable impracticality, and New York was to wait twenty-six years for its first subsurface transportation.

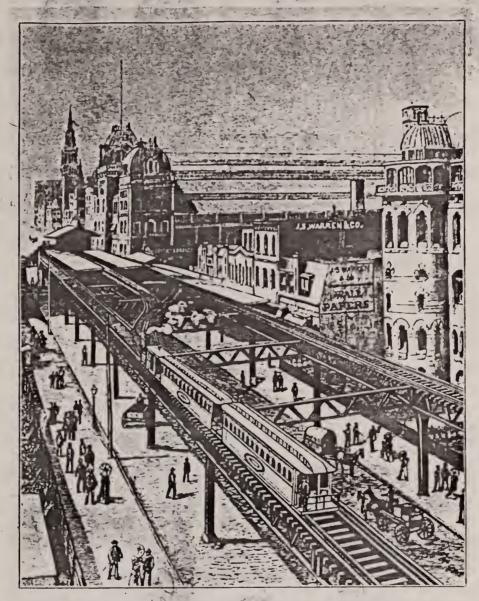
After more than one year of construction, the "El" was at last ready for its first customers. On August 26, 1878, a section of the road: was opened, from the Battery to 59th Street. The fare was five cents between any two stations on the line between 5:30 AM and 7:30 AM and 5 and 7 PM, and ten cents at all other times.

In these first days of operation, trains ran only from 5 AM to 8 PM at five-minute intervals except between 5 and 7 AM and 5 and 7 PM when they ran at three minute intervals. It took approximately forty-five minutes to get from City Hall to 59th Street when the line was first opened, although later the time for this distance of about four miles was decreased to thirty-five minutes.

"If the farmer who saw the first steamboat on the Hudson *
River, and who ran home in consternation to tell his wife
that he had seen the devil going up the river on a saw-mill,
had strolled down Third Avenue yesterday he would have taken

^{*} New York Herald - August 27, 1878





ARRIVAL OF FIRST PASSENGER TRAIN OF THE NEW YORK ELEVATED RAILROAD (THIRD AVENUE LINE) AT THE GRAND CENTRAL DEPOT, AUGUST 26, 1878

Looking west, showing Forty-second Street Spur.

(From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 7, 1878)

[107]

From The First Elevated Railroads in Manhattan & The Bronz of The City of New York - by William F. Reeves - pp. 107 - 1932



a still more marvelous tale home with him, for along the narrow roadway that lies on stationary stilts up and down that fair street there were a score of fiery demons rushing to and from all day..."

"But through it all, the long-suffering citizens were patient, for the magic words "Rapid Transit" made a whisper of consolation. There was a prospect that in the fulness of time it would be possible to get from one end of the city to the other without spoiling half a day..."

The populace along Third Avenue had a hard time getting used to its new convenience. Many "El" critics feared that the trains would plunge from their tracks onto the crowded streets below, while others protested that the steam locomotives would rain a shower of sparks and ashes on the people below. Even before construction began, there was fear that an elevated railroad would become the plaything of Peeping Toms who would be able to look in the upper stories of the homes along the avenue. And so it was in the first days of the "El", that many a fair maid would be seen in her boudoir because of insufficient curtaining.

The opening day of the "El" was a success. Comments from the spectators and officials of the railroad that day sharply contrasted with those which were to be enunciated seventy-seven years later. Typical remarks on the opening day were, "The "El" is a spectacle like an imposing array * of soldiers or a gorgeous cavalcade. The trains appear to

^{*} Holiday magazine - May 1955



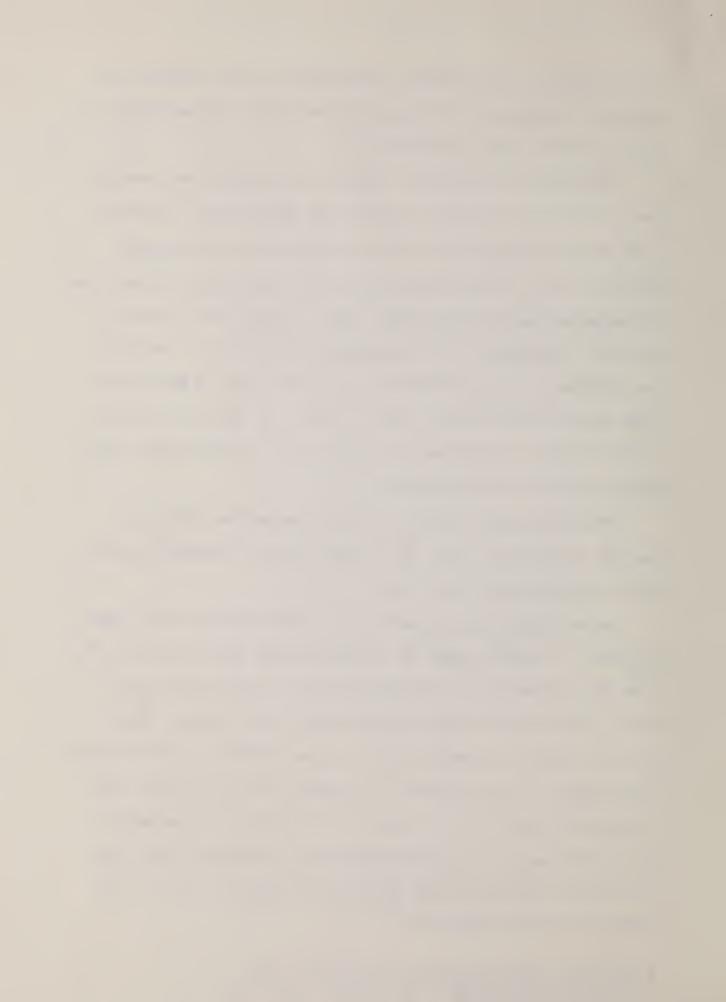
be in mid-air upon nothing! The people in the streets are reduced to pygmies! It requires some little nerve to sit at the car window and look down!"

When the New York City Transit Authority was pressing for a halt in service and subsequent demolition, comments like the following could be heard from those who agreed with the T.A. - "The Third Avenue "El" was opened to service * in Manhattan seventy-six years ago. It may have been as it once was described - "the crowning achievement in solving the problem of rapid transit" in its day, but that day is long since dead and gone. Now in 1954 the "El" is a major traffic hazard, an expensive eyesore and a thoroughly antiquated means of transportation..."

"The life expectancy of this Toonerville Trolley of the air is now less than five years and its rehabilitation would cost over \$80 millions."

An enlightening account of the "El" in its early days follows. - "Trains drawn by steam engines rattled up and I down the tracks at the alarming rate of thirty miles per hour. The engines belched sparks and smoke; ashes, water and oil dropped on pedestrians in the streets below. Horses took fright at the approach of every explosive train; the newspapers were full of reports of runaways or accidents and terror was not exclusively equine. Nervous folks protested that the cars were certain to jump the tracks and tumble into the avenues."

^{*} New York <u>Times</u> editorial - June 4, 1954 l Incredible New York - by Morris - pp. 273

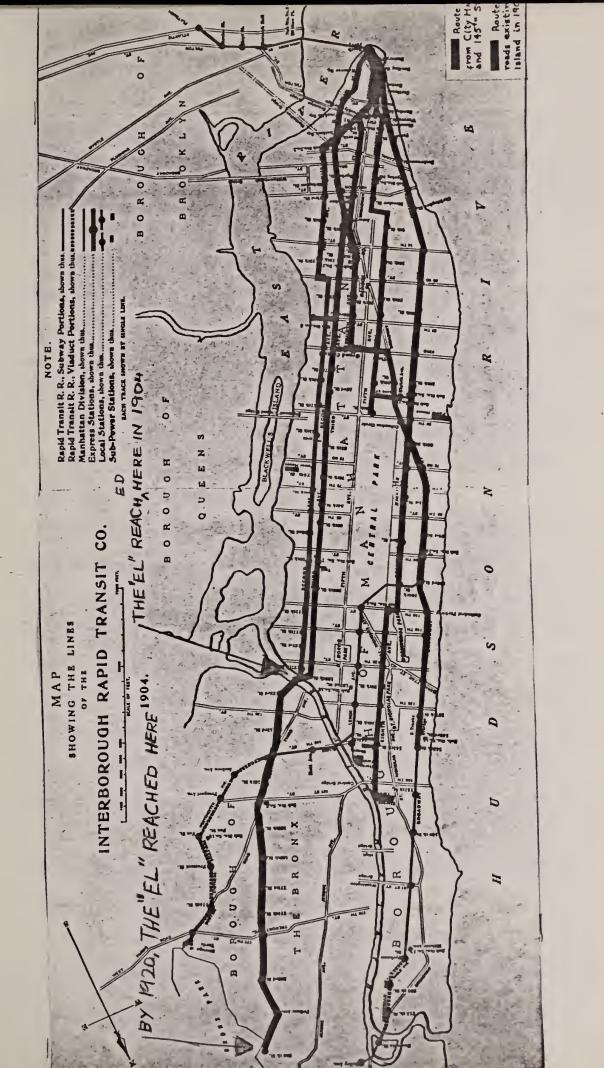


In spite of the tremulation of the people, within a year after the elevated railroad was put in operation, five hundred houses were built north of 50th Street. The new "model" or "dumbbell" tenements soon followed along the avenues made dark and incessantly noisy by the miracle of rapid transit.

In the decade from 1878 to 1888 the "El" was slowly extended. On January 1, 1879, the line was opened as far as 129th Street. The short branch from Chatham Square to City Hall opened on March 1, 1880, The need for rapid transit in the city became so urgent that the line was extended to East 177th Street in the Bronx in 1891, to Bronx Park in 1902, and in 1920, it was further extended to connect with the subway at Gun Hill and White Plains Roads.

The original line was operated by steam locomotive. At one time in the history of the "El" there were no less than sixteen types of locomotives operating, for they were needed of or many different purposes. In its charter, the Manhattan Railway Company was given the right to carry passengers, mail or freight, and it rendered the service of carrying freight to the public for about ten years. It was a truly essential part of New York City business, and at that time it could not have been accomplished as well in any other way. It was a unique service, and an interesting feature in the past operation of Manhattan elevated railway lines. Most New Yorkers, however, have forgotten, in the forty years







since the service was terminated, that freight was ever carried on elevated railroads. For many years the Wells Fargo Express Company ran its own special freight train three times a day on the Third Avenue road.

Most people also do not realize that, starting in 1895, the U.S. Mail was carried in special cars on the "El", that were fitted up "in miniature on the plan used on mail cars running on the various railroads throughout the country". This service began on October 2, 1895, with eight cars in regular service running every half hour from 5 AM to 8:30 PM and from 9 PM to 1 AM with a few extra trips every night for special delivery letters.

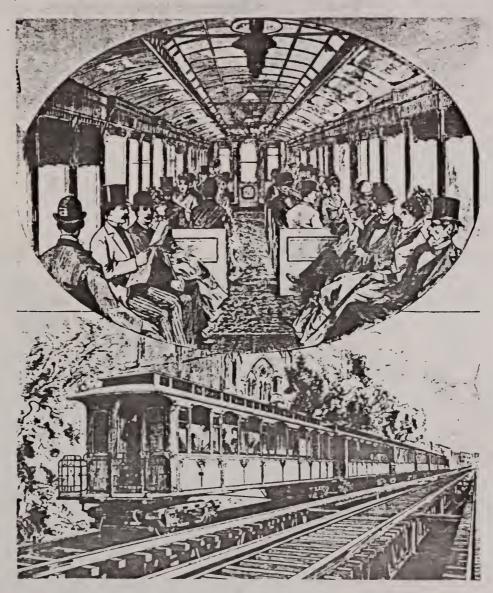
From 1878-9 the line was operated by the New York
Elevated Railway Company, which had a 99 year lease. The
Interborough Rapid Transit Company took over the lease one
year after it was founded (in 1902), and operated the line
until the unification of all the city's rapid transit lines
in June, 1940. When the IRT was formed in 1902, it leased
the Manhattan elevated roads then controlled by Jay Gould,
thus achieving a monopoly of rapid transit in Manhattan.
The surface lines in Manhattan and the Bronx were controlled
by Thomas F. Ryan and William C. Whitney through the Metropolitan Street Railway Company, the extravagent leases and
watered stock of which were notorious.

In 1900 the "El" had a lien filed against it for eight million dollars. The road had fallen into financial straits



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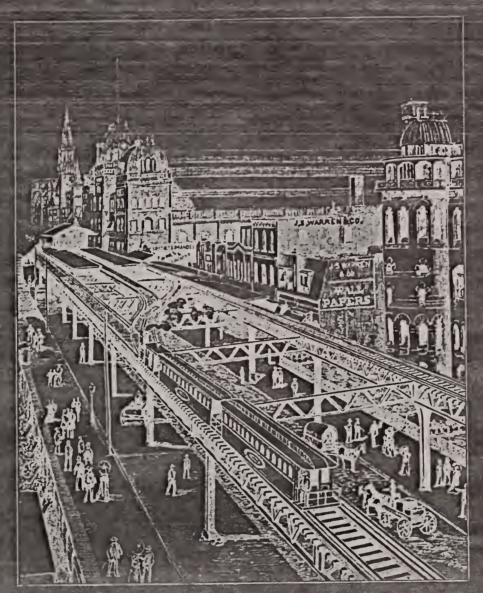
"Style" on the old Third Avenue horse care, the "Drawing Room,"



PULLMAN CARS ON THE ELEVATED, 1875

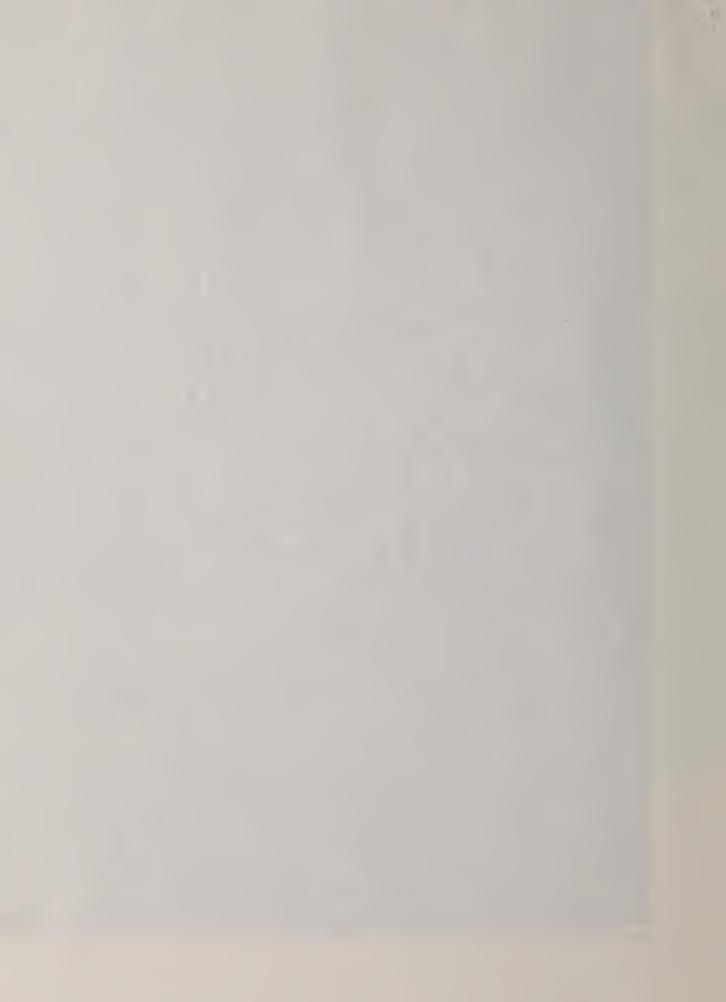
From <u>Incredible New York</u> - by Morris - pp. 106 Cars similar to those used on the Third Avenue Railroad at its inception.





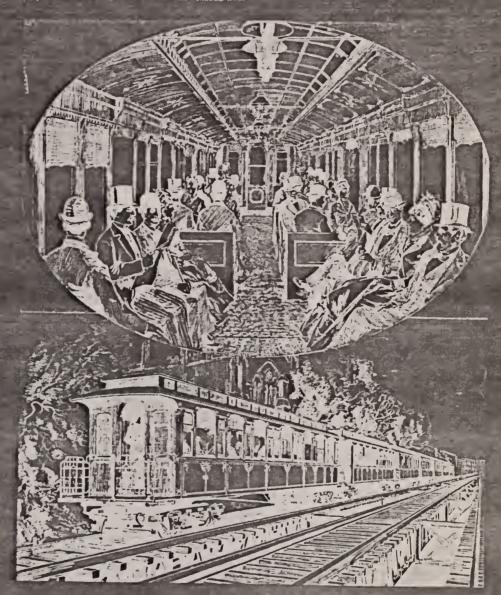
ARRIVAL OF FIRST PASSENGER TRAIN OF THE NEW YORK ELEVATED RAILROAD (THIRD AVENUE LINE) AT THE GRAND CENTRAL DEPOT, AUGUST 26, 1878

Looking west, showing Forty-second Street Spur.
(From Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 7, 1878)

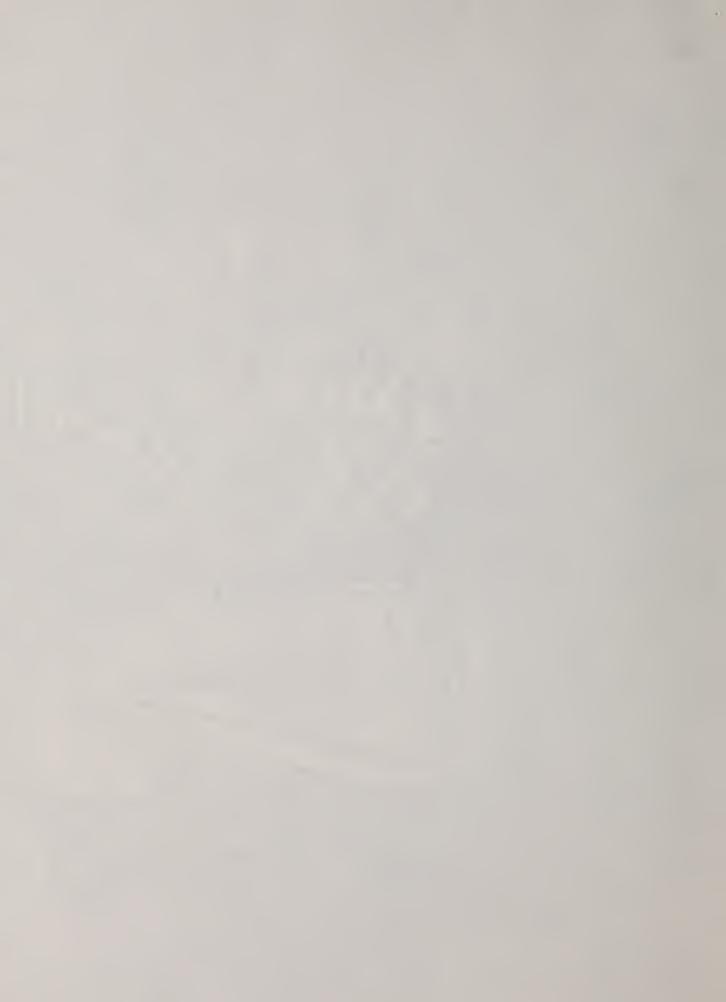


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PULLMAN CARS ON THE ELEVATED, 1875



because of mismanagement and corruption on the part of the Metropolitan Street Railway Company, which at the time owned a controlling share of the stock of the road. A typical reaction to this situation was voiced by Alderman Saul, "This was the largest lien ever filed in this or any other county so far as my knowledge goes. I consider the condition of the Third Avenue Road a public calamity. It is one of the most important and profitable surface lines in the U.S., and for it to get into this shape is beyond my comprehension."

Subsequently, the stock became the weakest on the list, falling from 108 to $98\frac{1}{2}$ on February 1, 1900. The weakness of the stock was due to conflicting rumors concerning the readjustment of the road's finances while in many quarters it was openly stated that, whatever officials of the company might say, it would be found that the dividend would be delivered as usual at the next dividend meeting of the board. Later in February, the company sought aid from bankers because its floating debt was falling due in various amounts,

It was said at thentime that the road represented a capitalization of \$16 millions, a noteworthy portion of which is said to have been wasted in the payments for contracts which politicians made an opportunity for "bleeding" the concern. The number of men to oversee construction work along the road when the motor power was changed, sometimes exceeded the number of men actually working. The road owed a

and the company did not have the money to pay it.

so we wa



total of \$33 millions, of which \$13 millions was funded debt and \$20 millions floating debt which had to be repaid right away. Therefore the company proposed a plan to fund the \$20 million dollar floating debt with the issuance of a \$25 million dollar mortgage, five millions of which were to be used to extinguish the old first mortgage, and the other twenty millions to extinguish the floating debt. The company also proposed the transfer in motive power from cable and steam locomotion to electric traction. Wall Street said that even after getting the \$33 millions paid off, the road would still have thirty million dollars worth of liabilities. They enumerated those liabilities as follows:

Loans from banks and trust companies..........\$17,000,000

Due to contractors & others for work on railroad... 5,000,000

Necessary to complete electrical equipping of system 5,000,000

Cost of new power house to provide electricity..... 3,000,000

\$30,000,000

It was believed by many that the transfer in motive power cost too much because the contractors took their time on the job, taking entirely too long.

Because of the disfatisfaction of the creditors due to the inefficiency of the Third Avenue "El" directors, the former put pressure on the board of directors to resign. The board agreed to retire. Thus the railroad underwent a revolutionary change in management and control. "This importent that railroad property, including the ownership of the great artery of surface traffic on the East Side of Manhattan Island and of subsidiary lines which spread out through the

^{* -} N.Y. Times - February 24, 1900



boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx from the North to the East River and as far north as Yonkers, is to pass quite out of the hands of its present possessors. It is to have new masters and new managers and is to be run by interests of recognized power in financial affairs...The fact is that the creditors of the road, the holders of its notes, are to become the owners."

In the early days of operation, tickets were sold to prospective passengers at the stations, and collected on the trains by the conductors. As traffic increased, however, this caused considerable confusion, and this method of taking up tickets was abolished on January 20, 1879. In June of 1880, came the cancelling boxes where passengers deposited their tickets before entering the train platform. The straight all-day five cent fare was introduced on all lines in the city in October-November 1886, and then passengers deposited their tickets in a ticket box at the station exit gates, after leaving the trains. Turnstiles, similar to those which still exist in the subways, were installed beginning in December, 1923.

Originally, all elevated cars were lighted by candles. There were two large sperm candles in each car in brackets, whose smoke stacks projected through the car roof. Oil lamps were employed in 1878, in cars and stations, but there was a popular prejudice against their use, because of the hazards involved. On March 28, 1883, oil was superseded for the



first time by gasoline. "Pintsch" gas (patented) was manufactured in one of the railroad yards, and was transferred daily to tanks under the cars. Electric lights were introduced in 1901-3, when the whole system was equipped for electric traction. Gas stoves were first used to heat waiting rooms and ticket offices in winter, and for a short spell, electric heaters were tried with varying results. These were finally succeeded by coal stoves.

On December 6, 1923, service was discontinued on the 42nd Street branch to the Grand Central Terminal because that structure had outlived its usefulness. On July 14, 1930, the branch line on 34th Street between Third Avenue and the East River was closed and later demolished. In 1950, service below Chatham Square to South Ferry was discontinued and the structure demolished. In 1951, service on the spur between Fordham Road and the Bronx Park Botanical Gardens was abandoned. On December 31, 1953, after seventy-three years of service, the spur from Chatham Square to City Hall was discontinued.

From March 14, 1952 until May 12, 1955, only weekday rush hour and midday service was operated south of East 149th Street. The reason for the curtailment of service was the inception of the Third Avenue buses which ran faster and more often than the old trolleys. Meanwhile the daily passenger rate fell from 200,000 in 1947 to 60,000 in 1954 and would presumably dwindle to nothing after the construction of the



of the proposed Second Avenue Subway at a cost of \$658 millions. A report by Col. S.H. Bingham, Executive Director and General Manager of the Transit Authority, stated that the Third Avenue Elevated Line had "outlived its use fulness, it has been carrying fewer passengers each year since 1947...riders using the line south of 149th Street can be accommodated on alternate transit facilities. The demolition of the above portion of the line would result in an estimated annual net saving of \$2.4 millions to the New York City Transit Authority

"The Third Avenue Line is the oldest existing elevated railroad in the city,...is in poor shape. Train operation on the local tracks is not controlled or protected by automatic signals. The cars in local service are made of wood, are old, and are therefore costly to operate and maintain. Both the New York City Transit Authority and the City government are primarily interested in safe operation and insist on the use of all-steel cars. To rehabilitate and put the elevated line south of 149th Street into first class modern operating condition would cost approximately \$80,000,000. Expenditure of such a sum is neither warranted now nor can be justified by potential traffic."

Another reason for demolition cited by the city, "From 1 a city planning standpoint, demolition of the line would remove a blight from Third Avenue and permit development of the street into one of the most valuable in the city, and

^{* -} Press release to the newpapers by Col. S.H. Bingham - 1954

^{1 -} Letter to L. Ackman from Borough President of Manhattan, Hulan E. Jack



add an urgently needed north-south traffic artery."

At the head of one of the most powerful labor unions in the city, and in fact in the U.S.A., is Michael Quill. It was expected by citymofficials that he and his Transport Workers Union of America - CIO would put up a very strong protest because of the lay-offs that would result from the proposed service cuts. The union declared that the city government was in the hands of unscrupulous real estate operators who anticipated the fat profits that were to be made out of the real estate price rise when the days of the "El" came to an end. The union held the view that the "El" should not be dismantled until the proposed Second Avenue Subway was finished. Said Joe Kutch, editor of the TWU Express, the union newspaper, "The destruction of the Third Avenue Elevated was motivated by real estate interests who have a strangle-hold on the newspapers of the city, because they have big advertising contracts to hand out." The union believed that if they could get enough popular support behind their move to save the "El", they would succeed. So their method was to cloud its real motive, that of saving the jobs of 3,200 members of their union. They tried to get the public support by making the people believe that the union was looking out for their interests. In many releases to the newspapers, in leaflets distributed by the TWU, and as a last resort by television, the union tried to convince the people that there was just cause to save that Currier



and Ives holdover. They even went so far as to say that

New York would be put in serious danger in time of war if

the "El" were torn down. "In the last war there was an ex-1

tensive mass transportation system to handle those who needed to use such facility because of the necessary curtail
ment of private transportation because of fuel shortages.

Will we have such facilities next time?" Quill stated,...

"The convenience of the poor people who have to use public 2

transportation is not being taken into consideration at all."

Quill pleaded that the morale of the transit workers was so

low because of "municipal politics" involved in the whole

transit crisis.

The final decision to discontinue the Third Avenue "El" was made after a public hearing which was held by the New York Transit Authority at the request of the Board of Estimate of the City of New York on June 4, 1954. Originally the plan was to halt service on December 31, 1954, then the date was postponed to April 15, and finally on May 12, 1955, the last run of the "Toonerville Trolley of the Air" took place at 6:04 PM. "With many a hoot of the whistle, a six 3 car train of the Third Avenue Elevated made a slow and sentimental progress last evening. It started from Chatham Square, Chinatown, four minutes behind schedule. When it reached 149th Street in the Bronx more than one and one half hours later, motorman William W. Foy applied the air brakes and brought the train to a screeching halt."

^{1 -} Letter From Joe Kutch to L. Ackman - 3/10/56

^{2 -} Press release to the N.Y.C. newspapers - 4/21/55

^{3 -} N.Y. <u>Times</u> - May 13, 1955



The last train of the last New York Elevated Line had completed its final journey - "The slowest trip in all my years on the "El" ", Mr. Foy said.

About eight hundred fifty persons made the trip; the five cars open to the public were jammed. Half a dozen men even stood on the outside platform ledges between trains (sic.). The sixth car was reserved for news and camera men and a handful of Transit Authority personel.

"By the time that 14th Street was reached, the cars 4 were so jammed no more passengers could get aboard.

... Farther uptown the crowds at the stations grew. But no one left the train and only a few of the most muscular could shove their way aboard. At 42nd Street there was a crowd of a hundred or more on the street below the station.

...It was at 59th Street...that a slim middle-aged man in a beret greeted the train by vigorously waving the green harped flag of Ireland, a tribute no doubt to the many sons of Ireland who manned the "El" from its inception."

On June 16, 1955, Borough President of Manhattan, Hulan E. Jack advertised for demolition bids at an estimated cost to the city of \$750,000. On July 23, Lipsett, Inc., of 99 Park Avenue, offered to pay the city \$330,665 for the "privilege" of wrecking the "El", in a surprise bid. The other thirteen bids that were submitted ranged from a cost to the city of \$1,690,000 to a bid of \$38,000 to be paid to the city. The reason that his firm could afford to pay so much,



said Morris Lipsett, President of the firm, was that the price of scrap steel had reached an all-time high, and that there were 40,000 tons of it in the "El". The city had based its estimate of the cost, (\$750,000), on the \$34,800 cost of razing 1,900 feet of the Third Avenue Line from City Hall to Chatham Square in 1954, and the fact that 37,266 feet of the "El" had to be demolished now.

By August 31, the first step of the demolition was almost finished; the removal of many miles of valuable copper wire from the structure. The contractors were being besieged by hundreds of souvenir hunters who wanted everything from signs to turnstiles, stained glass windows to pot-bellied stoves.

Most of the 40,000 tons of steel in the "El" was sent to the Bethlehem Steel Plant in Pennsylvania where it was converted into new steel at 3000 degrees Fahrenheit. When Mr. Jack had asked for bids, he had made the stipulation to the bidders prohibiting the sale of any scrap or salvage materials to any country "whose interests are inimical to those of the U.S., as determined by the Federal Government." Many people remember how the scrap steel from the Sixth Avenue "El" was sold to the Japanese in 1938, only to be turned against us in the form of planes and warships.

One section of the "El" from 34th Street to 42nd

Street had to be left standing because it carried power

from a sub-station in East 34th Street to the IRT Flushing



subway eight blocks north. But with the completion of a substitute loop from the Lexington Avenue Subway underground, the last purpose for the "El" was gone. The last pillar of the "El" came down at the end of February, 1956.

Mr. Jack promises that Third Avenue will be a model city highway with a seventy foot road, (ten feet wider than Madison Avenue and Lexington Avenue), and fifteen foot side-walks with trees planted at forty foot intervals on both sides of the street. The whole avenue is being repaved at a cost of \$1,200,000. A modern flourescent lighting system and new yellow street signs with black lettering are being installed. All these improvements will be completed in 1957 to the tune of \$2,000,000.

Real estate values along the avenue have already gone bullish. Clinton W. Blume, president of the Real Estate Board predicted: "Third Avenue will become the most magnificent area in the city. It was neglected for so many decades that there is very little costly construction to be torn down to make way for new buildings...It is almost virgin territory for large-scale high-class development, one of the few such areas that is well located - near the river, the United Nations, and Grand Central."

The demolition of the "El" has pointed up the ceaseless evolution of the city. Construction is already under way on the west side of Third Avenue, between 41st and 42nd Streets, where \$30,000,000, all-aluminum, Secony-Mobil skyscraper (forty-



five stories) is nearing completion. Next to that building, at 41st Street, a twenty-one story office structure is planned, to be ready by late fall in 1957. Also scheduled for late 1957 occupancy is a thirty-four story office building on the west side of Third Avenue between 46th and 47th Streets. Another addition will be a twenty story office building at 711 Third Avenue, between 44th and 45th Streets.

Apartment building activity is equally feverish. Even before the "El" was down, the city had a taste of the future in the chromium and glass Manhattan House, at Third Avenue and 66th Street. Other examples of this activity can be found in apartment houses going up at 18th, 20th, 35th, 36th, 57th, and 77th Streets.

The increase in realty values of old buildings, added to the flock of new office and apartment structures, will mean a tremendous amount of revenue for the city government. The present real estate tax rate is \$3.94 per one thousand dollars of assessed valuation in Manhattan.

Thus the last of the "Els" "is gone down the ringing 1 grooves of change", and has made way for a new era in the growth and improvement of New York City.



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The information from these books was only of an orienting nature, in so far as they helped me to arrange the important occurrances in the history of the "El" chronologically.



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